

FROM THE EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S DESK

Future Directions Workshop

By Graeme Charles

The workshop conducted by the Federation on October 19 was attended by a small number of member delegates and other interested persons, including **Don Kinnersley**, executive officer of the NSW Co-operative Federation.



It probably raised more questions than it answered, which is understandable, given that the workshop was restricted to less than three hours.

These are some comments from the workshop summary provided by its facilitator, **Melinda McPherson**: "Participants identified a number of stakeholder needs, e.g. the need for communication from the Federation (which is addressed, in part, by this newsletter). It was also suggested that the reasons for membership ranged from needs satisfaction to philosophical commitment to the co-operative model and a belief that there is strength in unity".

"However, in line with many of its contemporaries, the Federation must assess whether philosophical commitment and strength in unity will provide incentive enough for new membership or, indeed, maintenance of the current (declining) membership.

"Are the services that the Federation provides relevant to members? Are member co-operatives interested in raising awareness about their role and method of operation? Do they wish to share resources and work collectively towards any common goals? What do they require from a peak body?

"In order to develop an appropriate strategic and operational direction, the Federation needs to be clear about its stakeholders' requirements and distinctive competencies."

I had hoped that some of these questions would have been answered by the workshop, but the small numbers made it difficult to draw any conclusions.

I believe that few Victorian co-operatives, including both Federation members and non-members, have any sense of ownership of the Federation. This is the real challenge we are facing as a 'peak organisation'.

Developing directors program

As mentioned in earlier columns, the Federation commissioned Active Learning & Communication Co-operative to produce a kit for co-operatives and directors interested in developing their skills and knowledge in relation to their roles as directors.

The Federation has taken delivery of the kit, which is copyrighted to us, and will be embarking on a program to maximise its take-up by co-operatives.

The kit is a modular program, essentially designed for use in a learning circle, so that interested participants can get together to:

- explore the directors' role and responsibilities;
- identify essential and desirable knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviour; and
- identify pathways for developing these.

It has three major sessions:

- The Big Picture;
- Getting Down To Essentials; and
- Development Paths For Directors.

The kit contains a resource book of exercises to help explore the role of directors, appropriate development paths for directors, and case studies of several Victorian co-operatives.

You can expect to hear from the Federation shortly, but if you can't wait to get your hands on the kit or want to know more about it now, contact me at the Federation office, which is attended on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

Join the Federation

The Federation distributes this newsletter to many co-operatives who are not Federation members.

If you read and enjoy *Victorian Co-operative News* and would like to talk about becoming a member, please contact me. I would be delighted to discuss Federation membership.

It was with great pleasure that we recently received an application for membership from the Warrnambool Co-operative Society, one of Victoria's significant co-operatives. It has a membership base of around 8000.

You will be able to read more about the Warrnambool Co-operative Society in future issues of *Victorian Co-operative News*.

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Member feedback

By David Griffiths

Member democracy is the essence of co-operation – a vigorous, critical and participating membership.

An element of this is written, telephone and e-mail feedback from members to the Board and/or Executive Officer – whether it is positive or negative.

Feedback is essential, as it helps us get a sense of how you think the Federation is doing – what we are doing 'right' and 'wrong'.

In the Annual Report, I provided my perspective on how your Federation is going. I tried to balance the 'negatives' and the 'positives' i.e. reality. However, it is more important that we get your perspective.



In the Annual Report I also referred to 10 member co-operatives who had expressed dissatisfaction with Federation services in the past. It is important that these concerns are articulated and recognised – and that the Federation meaningfully responds to the issues. Repressive tolerance does not serve anyone's interest.

Of course, limited resources guarantee difficulties with processes and outcomes; things will be overlooked, forgotten and/or neglected. These circumstances should be understood – not tolerated. Feedback could, for instance, be an essential reminder of the need to respond to a forgotten letter.

Over the past 12 months, however, our level of activities and achievements have significantly exceeded our resources – a tribute to an over-worked and under-paid Executive Officer, the Board and those member co-operatives where there is a strategic partnership. For example, Active Learning & Communications Co-operative, Co-operative Energy, Co-operative Purchasing Services and the North East Telecommunications Co-operative.

The Executive Officer, **Graeme Charles**, has the confidence of the board. He has amply demonstrated his ability and willingness to serve the board dutifully and respectfully.

I would encourage members, however, to provide feedback to the board and the Executive Officer.

All I ask is that the feedback is courteous and polite – and continuous. Feedback that hectors and threatens is unfortunate and disappointing.

We have only anecdotal evidence, for instance, about what our members think about *Victorian Co-operative News* and its inclusion in *National Co-op Update*. I think we have created a significant value-added service.

There will be a survey with the next issue of *Victorian Co-operative News*, which will be your opportunity to agree or disagree with this assessment and help us plan for the future.

Your feedback makes a reality of our commitment to continuous improvement.

NEW CO-OPERATIVE BOOKLETS

The Co-operative Federation of Victoria has just received two booklets about group energy purchasing and the co-operative model.

Written by David Griffiths and published by Co-operative Energy, the booklets explore and argue the case for co-operative energy purchasing.

The booklets are:

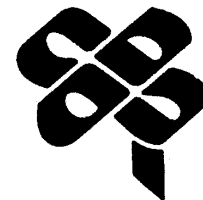
- **'Group Buying Power' – energy co-operatives empowering small consumers (\$5.00, incl. postage); and**
- **'New Government, New Direction, New Energy' – empowering individuals and their communities through co-operatives by using mutuality instead of dependence and subservience (\$7.50, incl. postage).**

If you include a photocopy of this page, you will receive a 20% discount (i.e. both booklets for \$10.00, incl. postage).

Income from these booklets goes towards to the Co-operative Federation of Victoria.

The Co-operative Federation of Victoria is not required to register or collect GST. Its ABN is 17 045 241 689.

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Victoria on the move with national legislation

CFV executive officer, **Graeme Charles**, met for the first time with interstate colleagues in late November for a meeting of the Co-operative Council of Australia (CCA).

The CCA consists of representatives from state co-operative federations. It includes Victoria, NSW, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia.

The council generally convenes once or twice a year, although last time it met was in Adelaide during October 1999. It is an opportunity for state representatives to share their experiences and concerns.

The meeting, held over two days, focused on co-operative legislation.

The council was joined on the second day by the Co-operative National Working Party (CNWP), which was established in July 1, 2000, by the Ministerial Council on Consumer Affairs, to develop recommendations for achieving nationally consistent co-operative legislation.

On the whole, most of the state legislation is consistent, however there are a number of outstanding issues and anomalies relating to trading and raising funds in states other than the host state.

The CNWP, consisting of officials from state consumer affairs departments, wished to meet with the

CCA to canvas the views of the Australian co-operative sector on the national legislation issue.

The discussions identified the absolute necessity to identify a process which would enable co-operatives to both trade and fund raise across state borders.

'Mutual recognition' and 'template legislation' were the two reform options which emerged as the most suitable alternatives.

The CNWP, under the direction of the fair trading ministries in each state, has assigned a high priority to the issue of sorting out existing difficulties and achieving truly national co-operative legislation.

A report is due to be put before the Ministerial Council by the CNWP by January 31, 2001.

The Victorian representative on the working party has indicated that the State Government is willing to review and, where possible, expedite the process of achieving national legislation.

As this is an issue of importance to many of our members, the Victorian Federation has offered to act as a conduit to the process.

Co-operatives actively engaged in the areas affected by the national legislation proposal are encouraged to contact the Federation and present their views immediately for consideration in the CNWP's report.

MARKETING OUR CO-OPERATIVE ADVANTAGE

In 2001, the Victorian Federation will be involved in a series of workshops called 'Marketing our Co-operative Advantage,' run by Dr Tom Webb, from the Extension Department of St Francis Xavier University, Canada.

The workshops will be held in association with the Australian Centre for Co-operative Research and Development (ACCoRD) and the NSW Co-operative Federation.

The workshops, based on a program run by Dr Webb in Canada and the US, will explore thoughts on co-operatives and marketing.

The workshops grew out of a belief that there were benefits to be had if marketing by co-operatives reflected their pride, not only in the products and services they sold, but in what they were as co-operatives.

Dr Webb believes the time has come for

co-operatives to rethink every aspect of what they do in response to a rapidly changing world.

As co-operatives are a group of people working together to meet their own needs, he maintains that all transactions should reflect an openness and trust not possible if one party is out to benefit at the expense of others.

As people-based businesses, owned from the bottom up, co-operatives are focused on community needs. They put decision making as close as possible to the community and make community benefit a consideration in the decision-making process. This is the co-operative advantage.

Details of the workshops will be advised in the new year.

CFV
news

– November /
December 2000 –

Active Learning and Communication

Active Learning and Communication (ALCC) is a co-operative of consultants formed in June 1999. We operate in NSW and Victoria. Our services include:

- consultancy;
- education and training;
- technical writing;
- marketing;
- facilitation; and
- event management.

This means we are equipped to work on a range of areas, all centred on strategic communication and adult learning.

Our members range in age from 25 to 65 years, with interests ranging from environmental management, industrial relations to new media and learning circles.

Before forming the co-operative, many of our members had successful consultancy companies. So why did we form a co-operative?

Dare to be different ...

Our members were successful at drawing in income through their businesses, but they all lacked mutuality and the scope to share their passions with other people.

Becoming a co-operative has also allowed pooling of expertise and

marketing efforts, which meant value-added service to clients, and greater ability to compete effectively with larger organisations.

Ours is a non-profit co-operative, so while our members earn fees from the projects we undertake, there are no shares or dividends.

Members expect that the co-operative will never constitute more than 80% of their income and are committed to maintaining their independent identities and income-earning activities.

Location

ALCC is a co-operative based on common beliefs and expertise, rather than location. Board members are based in Sydney, Melbourne/East Timor and on the NSW South Coast, making phone conferences important.

ALCC tries for a face-to-face board meeting at least twice a year. It is also exploring the use of Internet and video-conferencing. Communication, internal and external, is a vital issue.

Like many other co-operatives, ALCC is looking at the best way to stay in touch with all its members, using opinion surveys, and provid-

ing ways to learn and participate, in addition to voting at elections or serving on the board or committees.

From now on

ALCC believes providing value to its customers and members is the key to its success. Its projects include:

- finalising the *Developing Directors* program;
- developing a learning circle-based education program about stress management, to be used in conjunction with a martial arts and meditation training program;
- a visioning and strategic marketing workshop for a communication co-operative;
- learning circle programs on topics ranging from 'The Art of Storytelling' to crisis management and sea kayaking; and
- developing the 'Sociable Paddler's Guide to the Shoalhaven'.

Contact: Marie-Louise McDermott, Chairperson, Active Learning and Communication Co-operative, phone (02) 4448 5100 or e-mail mlmcd@shoal.net.au

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